



# Issues and Future Direction of Physical Education in Nigeria

by Michael O. Mgbor

## *Abstract*

*This paper examines the issues that influenced the development of physical education in Nigerian schools after the country's political independence in 1960. Negative forces, which affected the tempo of growth, are discussed, and suggestions for the future direction of physical education in Nigeria, particularly given its importance in national development, are presented.*

Physical activities have been part of Nigerian education since precolonial times, but the push for physical education programs in schools did not start in earnest until Nigeria's political independence in 1960. Though physical educators in Nigeria are doing their best given available resources, the discipline still suffers from basic problems. During the past two decades, the education sector was neglected by the military administration in place, which accounted for many of these issues.

The history of physical education in Nigeria dates back to precolonial times. In fact, before the country was under British administration, Nigeria had a traditional educational system that recognized the elements of physical activities. As Fafunwa (1974) observed, though Nigeria consisted of many ethnic groups, each with its own culture and tradition, these groups had common educational aims and objectives. Methods, however, differed from place to place largely due to social, economic, and geographical imperatives.

As was the practice in European, Asiatic, and American societies, the education of a child in Nigerian society began at infancy. According to Fafunwa (1974), traditional Nigerian education emphasized training the child in toileting, eating, socialization, and general behavior. Physical training also was a significant aspect of this traditional education.

The African child, like his European or Asiatic counterpart, enjoyed exploring his environment and observing adults and imitating them. Physical activities, such as running, jumping, wrestling, tree climbing, and swimming, provided a ready opportunity for all-round development. Omolewa (1996) acknowledged that jumping, wrestling, climbing, dancing, and swimming were all forms of traditional sports in colonial Nigeria, and were part of the inhabitants' lifestyles. Two of the seven cardinal goals of traditional African and Nigerian education were related to physical education (Fafunwa 1974). These goals were developing children's latent physical skills and building character among youth—both of which remain primary objectives of physical education programs in Nigeria today.

### ***Physical Education in Colonial Nigeria***

The British colonial administration brought tremendous changes in the lives and times of Nigerians, some of which led to confusion among the natives (Achebe 1958). One area that was drastically changed by the new administration was the education of children. Previously, schools were run by missionaries, primarily to train their adherents and prepare clergy members for the study of sacred writings and the performance of religious duties (William Boyd in Fafunwa 1974). In these schools, physical training, as it was known at the time, primarily was used to maintain discipline among the children.

School programs in colonial Nigeria did not differentiate between the components of physical education, health education, and recreation (Omoruan 1996). The programs also were beset by problems, such as lack of qualified staff and inadequate teaching facilities and equipment, as well as the misinterpretation of the values inherent in physical education. Physical education was regarded as a nonacademic and extracurricular activity that should take place after the normal academic work of the day.

The main method of instruction in colonial Nigeria was the command style, in which the learners listened to specific instructions from the teacher and then complied rigidly. Lacking qualified personnel, schools used retired physical training instructors from the colonial Army to teach children (Laoye and Ackland 1981). This practice was understandable in light of the fact that physical education previously had not been an established subject at universities, and only a few students were qualified to teach the subject when they graduated. The emphasis on military drills was discontinued and significant changes were made in the physical education programs in Nigerian schools when curriculum changes occurred in Britain and the colonies.

In 1957 (Laoye and Ackland 1981), a significant breakthrough in the development of physical education in Nigerian schools occurred when the Nigeria College of Arts, Science, and Technology, Zaria, established a specialized College of Physical Education for the professional preparation of physical education teachers. This college, which eventually became Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, helped develop Nigeria's physical education program when the country gained political independence in October 1960.

### ***Physical Education in Post-Independence Nigeria***

Graduates of the College of Physical Education made laudable efforts to establish and develop physical education programs in Nigeria's school system through their teaching, su-

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pervision, and curriculum revision activities. By the end of first decade after Nigeria's political independence, physical education and recreation programs were springing up in several of the country's tertiary institutions. The first degree-awarding institution was the Powell College of Physical and Health Education at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in 1961.

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By the early 1970s, physical education programs in Nigeria became very popular because:

- the federal government's post-war reconciliation program emphasized youth sports as a means of fostering national unity; and
- the universal, free primary education program prompted the massive training of teachers, particularly those for the primary school system.

This was a period of glory for physical education in Nigeria, and qualified teachers were highly sought after. A continuing high level of interest among students in this area of study spurred most Nigerian universities and colleges of education to offer physical education programs. Today, 20 Nigerian universities offer physical education programs, with many of them offering postgraduate degrees.

### ***Developmental Factors***

Several factors positively influenced the rapid growth and development of physical education in Nigeria into the 1990s, including:

- NAPHER (Nigeria Association for Physical, Health Education, and Recreation);
- Nigeria's National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1977, 1981); and
- governmental support of sports festivals, sports-specific policies, and Vision 2010 (1997).

### ***NAPHER***

NAPHER is an umbrella organization for physical education, health education, and recreation professionals affiliated with ICPHER-SD (International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport, and Dance). Though Harding Ekpengin, a physical education pioneer, attempted to form NAPHER in the early 1960s (Oduyale 1983), it was not until 1966 that members came together at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and formed the organization.

Initial hurdles faced by NAPHER included being recognized as a learned professional association and convincing the government to recognize physical education as an academic subject. In the 1970s, NAPHER witnessed tremendous growth in membership and, in June 1984, was recognized as a learned professional association by the federal government

of Nigeria (Ojeme 1988). According to Ojeme (1991), these accomplishments resulted in physical education becoming an examinable subject in the school system.

### **Nigeria National Policy on Education**

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1977, 1981) was a document adopted by Nigeria's federal government to guide the administration and practice of education in the country. In this policy, the Nigerian government clearly stated that physical education would be emphasized at all levels of the educational system. These policy provisions tremendously helped NAPHER to grow and develop, and made physical education a core subject in Nigeria's primary and secondary educational systems.

However, the initial interest that followed the passage of this governmental regulation faded away. Today, physical education does not have the same prominence it once had and, in fact, the course is not taught in most Nigerian primary and secondary schools. Facilities and equipment aren't available, time is not allocated in the instructional day, and teachers are either unavailable or unsupervised. This situation explains why Hardman and Marshall (2000) claimed that, in terms of implementing physical education policies, there is great concern about this region's shortfalls.

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This trend also is prevalent worldwide, with continuing de-emphasis and even elimination of school physical education programs in most countries (Hardman and Marshall 2000; Stein 2000).

### **The Need for Grassroots Sports**

**Sports festivals.** At the end of the Nigeria civil war in 1970, the federal government recognized that youth sports could be used effectively to foster much-needed national unity. In 1973, national sports festivals were established, and continue to be a strong impetus for physical education programs in the country.

**National Sports Development Policy.** In 1988, the Nigerian federal government developed a document to guide sports development for the nation. The National Sports Development Policy (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1989) outlined specific expectations in sports development by various units of the Nigerian society, such as local, state, and federal governments, educational institutions, clubs, and voluntary organizations. This policy was well-conceived and indicated that the government was aware of the role sports had in the development of the nation. The policy still has not been fully implemented, however, as is often the case with governmental policies in Nigeria.

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**Vision 2010.** Vision 2010 was a policy document developed by the Nigerian federal government to guide its activities in all areas of governance through the year 2010. In 1997, the final report of Vision 2010, as it related to sports development, was published. However, this document, like its predecessor, the National Sports Development Policy (1989), has not been implemented effectively. Therefore, it has not had significant impact on physical education programs in Nigeria.

### **Negative Influences**

Several negative factors have worked against the growth and development of physical education programs in Nigeria. These include:

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- lack of knowledge of the merits of physical education;
- emphasis on teacher-preparation programs;
- inadequate facilities and equipment;
- poorly staffed schools; and
- the absence of relevant literature.

**Limited awareness of physical education's merits.** There is still a low level of awareness among Nigerians of the merits of physical education. This lack of knowledge has led to declining enrollment in physical education and recreation classes, particularly in tertiary institutions. Even those students who eventually enroll in physical and health education courses typically do so as a last resort, when no other viable options exist.

**Emphasis on teacher preparation programs.** Nearly all physical education programs in Nigerian higher institutions are based in the School of Education. This practice has dwarfed the scope of these programs and has made them unpopular. Because Nigerian teachers are so poorly paid, most young people do not choose teaching as a profession.

**Poor facilities and equipment.** Facilities for the basic instruction of physical education are almost nonexistent in most Nigerian public schools. Because basic facilities are needed to be successful, physical education teachers are not making much progress in their efforts to implement the programs.

**Understaffed schools and unmotivated, ill-prepared teachers.** Most schools in Nigeria, particularly primary and secondary schools, are poorly staffed in terms of the number of physical education teachers and their level of preparation and motivation. Teachers in Nigerian schools generally are underpaid, and sometimes are owed salaries in arrears of up to six months. These conditions have dramatically lowered teachers' level of motivation.

**Dearth of literature.** Schools in Nigeria, from the primary level to the tertiary level, lack adequate reading materials, particularly on physical education. Publishing books is quite expensive, and most professionals do not receive adequate support for their efforts. For some time, the only available physical education textbook in Nigeria has been the 1975 or 1983 edition of Charles Bucher's *Foundations of Physical Education*.

### ***Future Directions in Physical Education in Nigeria***

Despite problems associated with physical education programs in Nigeria, the increasing role of sports in the country's society foretells hope for improvement. The efforts described here can help guide the future direction of physical education in Nigeria.

**Increase awareness.** The Nigerian public, particularly policy makers, parents, and children, continually must be made aware of the importance of physical education programs. This should be a relatively simple undertaking because, in general, Nigerians are sports lovers; and physical education contributes to the success of athletes. For example, parents would like their children to become professional sports stars—such as J. J. Okocha, an international football player, or Akeem Olajuwon, a basketball star—but may not agree with their choice of physical education as a university course. This same attitude is true of policy makers and even youths. The government, for example, spends huge sums of money to organize professional sporting events, but fails to recognize that the foundation of success in sports is a good physical education program in the school system. Conferences, seminars, and radio and television discussions are all useful tools in increasing awareness.

**Curriculum diversification.** Physical education programs, particularly those at the tertiary level, need to offer curricular options. In addition to training teachers of physical education and recreation, sports coaches, administrators, technologists, journalists, trainers, and consultants must receive proper training. An urgent need exists to develop programs outside the College of Education that meet the needs of physical education students who do not want to become teachers.

**Closer cooperation between physical education professionals.** The need for closer cooperation between professionals in various areas of physical education, such as health education, recreation, sports, and dance, is critical. By working together in research activities and on curriculum issues, these groups would have a unified sense of purpose and be more likely to achieve their goals. President of ICHPER-SD Mimi Murray (2000) summarized the need for closer cooperation:

*If we can join our voices cooperatively, our combined voice will prove to be much louder and more likely to be heard by government leaders of our countries and the world who are responsible for education policies.*

### ***Conclusion***

The Nigerian educational system virtually has collapsed at all levels—from the primary level to the tertiary level—except for a few privately owned schools. Infrastructure, such as classrooms, laboratories, offices, and sports facilities that were built in the 1970s

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and early 1980s, are totally in ruins due to the lack of maintenance or replacement. In some public primary schools, children sit on the floor because there are not enough writing tables and seats. Even at the college level, it is common to see hundreds of students crowded into lecture rooms designed for 50 students. Hostel accommodations designed for two university students sometimes are occupied by more than ten students which, in turn, overextends limited student support services, such as eating places, health centers, and toilet facilities. These conditions create high levels of stress and tension among stu-

dents, leading to increased criminal activities such as drug abuse, cultism, and restiveness.

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The emergence of a democratic Nigeria in 1999 ended 16 years of constant military rule. With the restoration of democratic rule in Nigeria, there is hope that the country's economy will improve and schools will be better funded. Nigerians like sports, and there is no reason why physical education should be neglected by any good government.

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